

Can the Commonwealth Games change perceptions of the Gold Coast?

Written by David Rowe, Emeritus Professor of Cultural Research, Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University

Just as the Australian men's cricket [ball-tampering scandal](#) exhausts itself at last, the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games appears, as if on cue, to fill the feelgood sporting void.

These are, after all, the “[Friendly Games](#)”, as celebrated in stamp collections. They are meant to be free of the sledging and cheating witnessed in the South Africa-Australia test cricket series.

But is the Commonwealth Games the most appropriate vehicle to elevate the collective spirit? Its origins in the British Empire Games are a permanent reminder that they were forged out of imperialism, colonialism and dispossession.

That this relic of Empire is being hosted by the glitzy Gold Coast, which [still struggles to be regarded as an actual city](#) (unlike its immediate Commonwealth Games predecessor, Glasgow), looks like a cruel cosmic joke.

The Gold Coast Commonwealth Games will host more than 6,600 athletes and officials from 71 Commonwealth nations. It is the [fifth largest](#) sporting event in the world, and will be the [biggest ever](#) Commonwealth Games and para-sports program.

Read more: [***The Commonwealth Games are an opportunity to face up to the history of colonialism***](#)

The Gold Coast aims to be considered a “world-class boutique city” as part of the [legacy of the Games](#)

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This is in contrast to its “ [reputation for tackiness](#) ”, its picturesque beaches, and its Florida-like caricature as “ [God’s waiting room](#) ”.

Quickly turning around a city’s image is a difficult task. And the Commonwealth Games, as with the Olympics and other large sporting events, may not be the best vehicle for this kind of transformation.

The experience of Olympic cities such as Atlanta (1996), Sydney (2000), Vancouver (2010), London (2012), and Rio de Janeiro (2016) is of trying to prevent shiny, happy images being [be smirched by the grim realities of urban poverty](#)

In fact, this is already happening on the Gold Coast, with the [promise](#) of “greater reconciliation and social justice for all Australians” looking rather hollow as [many local homeless people](#) are exiled across the New South Wales border.

Controlling the media narrative

Hosting any major international sport event attracts a large entourage of journalists with time on their hands. A series of “colour” stories will be generated.

Some will be innocuous travelogues (and even sponsored content), while others are likely to be less flattering. Cliches that have [already been trotted out](#) include those focusing on drugs, alcohol, violence, bikie gangs, and gun crime in Surfers Paradise.

[Already](#) , an Australia-based Indian journalist has been charged with people-smuggling, involving eight Indian nationals allegedly claiming to be accredited media covering the Games.

Read more: [**The Commonwealth Games of exclusion: what are authorities so**](#)

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[afraid of?](#)

With so many people attending from poor and troubled Commonwealth countries, Australia's notoriously punitive border protection policy could also intrude on the idea of these being the "[Friendly Games](#)".

And as the Queen's Baton Relay passed through Southeast Queensland, [stories about unsold tickets](#), absent visitors, a [flu outbreak](#), and needles in the Athlete's Village have unsettled the organisers.

The waning prestige of the games

This is the third time in 30 years that Australia has hosted the Commonwealth Games. In that period the event has mostly shuffled between the affluent, Anglo-dominated UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

The only time it broke out of the Anglosphere in those decades was the [Kuala Lumpur 1998 Games](#), and, [unhappily](#), the 2010 Delhi games.

In any case the competition to host the games is diminishing, with the Gold Coast's [sole competition for the 2018](#) games being Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

Read more: [The ties that \(still\) bind: the enduring tendrils of the British Empire](#)

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But the Commonwealth Games are, ultimately, about sport. With major world sport powers such as the United States and China ineligible, how important is it to compete at the Commonwealth Games and win a medal?

Usain Bolt, the most famous athlete of recent times, reportedly [described Glasgow 2014 as "a bit shit"](#) and the Olympics "better" – statements that he later denied.

Many athletes of world renown will be competing, including Australia's Sally Pearson, Jamaica's Elaine Thompson, England's Adam Peaty, and South Africa's Caster Semenya. But other prominent athletes, including [several leading Kenyan distance runners](#), are planning to miss the Games in favour of other, more compelling athletic priorities.

These and other leading Commonwealth athletes have decided not to disrupt their training for what they regard as more important events, like World Championships.

Queensland has invested [around A\\$2 billion](#) in the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games. Getting a decent return and long-term benefits from this sport-led urban adventure may prove elusive.

Nonetheless, memorable sporting moments and displays of camaraderie among athletes, officials and spectators can be anticipated. As most of the Games' audience cannot attend, it is hoped that exclusive television broadcaster Channel Seven covers them well, avoiding the national chauvinism and stereotyping that has [marred previous televised sport events](#).

At the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games, for instance, host broadcaster Channel Nine was [heavily criticised for its parochialism](#).

Copyright disagreements have led to [boycotts by major news organisations](#), but there will be no shortage of television, radio, print, online and media coverage of the Gold Coast games.

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Scenes of sand, sea and skyscrapers will add a glitzy veneer to an Old Empire at play.

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